



Write Your Life Story

E-Course Edition

Cate Russell-Cole

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Write Your Life Story E-Course

“After the writer's death, reading his journal is like
receiving a long letter.”

Jean Cocteau

(French Poet, Novelist, Actor, Film Director and Painter, 1889-1963)

Welcome to the course, I hope that it inspires you to pursue the writing you want to do. I have been working on record of my life story in some form since I was a child. It has now being transferred into a digital form which can be added to our family history. I'd like to share with you the techniques I have learnt and used. I'm sure you will be inspired by them too.

This course is not just for someone who wants to write an autobiography. The same process you go through to write your own story is a concrete basis for writing a family member's life story, whether in part or full. Many of the techniques you will see in the course will be aimed at writing about you. Don't take that too literally. Just apply them to the person you are writing about. Think about how you would use that technique to capture them.



Starting to write about yourself will also show you the way forward in how to capture the spirit of any person in writing. A personal touch will help you to

liven up the piles of documents and photos which make up your family history.

There are many reasons for writing yours and other family members' stories. You may want to put the family history down on paper for other members of the family to read and know how they became who they are. You may have been told your life story or ancestor's is interesting and that you should write it down.

Perhaps you want to look back on what has happened to you, or your lineage, and make some sense of it; or learn lessons from the paths taken.

Maybe there is a story of overcoming an illness, disability or other significant challenge or emotional trauma which you'd like to share to inspire others. You may have a specialized knowledge in some area you want to talk about.

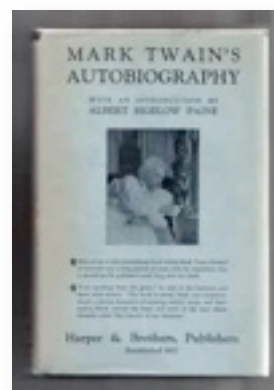


Whatever the reason is, writing your autobiography and the stories of other family members is a rewarding and exciting process. I would like to give you as much encouragement and help as I can to do it.

Is My Story Worth Writing?

Have you ever asked yourself if the life story that interests you is worth writing about? Will it be of interest to anyone else? Consider some of these points from writers of various autobiography books. I think you will find them encouraging.

- No one else in this entire world has had the same experiences.
- Your family and friends may enjoy getting to know the person they thought they already knew, from a completely different perspective.
- Learning about what makes someone tick can be very rewarding and empowering.
- Every life matters: it has meaning and is important.
- Write for the pure pleasure of writing.
- You can write for self discovery or as a recovery process which has therapeutic value. (I will include articles on this aspect in week 5.)



Writing In Manageable Chunks

It's a daunting task to write a book or try to bring piles of dates, photos, letters and documents to life. There are many people with partially completed projects, even several half written books! I know a few. The idea is to write about your life or family history in easily manageable chunks or sections. One section will equal one period or event you want to address. If you write in small sections, later then you can edit them, take out what is too personal, add more, and easily rearrange it into any format that works for you.

The purpose of this course is to get you started, give you some ideas and let you be creative. We are working on the process, not just the final product. The idea is to enjoy writing and discover new approaches that inspire you.

One cautionary note. This is also to be a positive course. I don't want you to dredge up painful memories which are going to make you feel sad, or may take you back into a trauma you have been through. The emphasis throughout will be to look at the positive aspects of your life and your loved one's



life. If you want to write about negative incidents, you are welcome too, as long as it doesn't open old wounds which are best left untouched. If your story will definitely open up wounds, please read Week 5 now.

The writing approach that I take is to get you to write in a personal journal before you finalise what will go into your family story or your own life story. Think of it like a messy first draft, full of bits and pieces that are seemingly unrelated. When you have it all down, then you can step back, look at what you have collected, and decide how you want to put it all together. You can do it chronologically, or by order of the most important events in your life and their significance. You can do it by themes, ages, historical events, individual milestones, short pieces to accompany photos or documents, people who have played key roles, whatever you like.

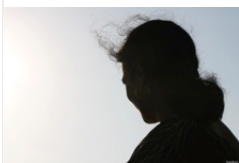
Feel free to also include photos, letters, newspaper clippings, poetry, print outs of relevant web pages, song lyrics; whatever you desire that expresses your thoughts, feelings and will provoke memories. Adding in research on towns, culture, natural disasters, or world or local events that occurred during the periods of time you are covering, will also enliven and enhance your work.

On Writing Memoir and Capturing Characters

By Inkspot guest lecturer Michelle Richmond

"One of the wonderful things about writing memoir is that there is so much life material to use when we allow ourselves to fully explore our pasts. Much of that material comes from character. This is beginning to sound easy, isn't it?

Not so fast. Because the characters who make up our memoirs are part of our lives, and because we know them so well, it's easy to skimp on characterization as we write our stories. We may expect the reader to find the person interesting because he or she is



interesting to us, yet we don't allow the reader to get to know the character in the way that we know him or her. It's easy to take character traits for granted, leaving the reader in the dark.

Remember that your readers know nothing about any of these people until you tell them. Therefore you must be absolutely vigilant in thinking about, and presenting, all the real people you write about - including yourself - as characters, first and foremost. Remember, every good story is character-driven.

In his memoir, "A Childhood," Harry Crews introduces us to characters who seem more like the stuff of imagination than of reality. Notice Crews's description of Hollis Toomey and his wife:

"His wife always wore her hair tightly bunned at the back of her head under a stiffly starched white bonnet. Her dresses were nearly to her ankles, and they always looked and smelled as if they had just come off the clothesline after a long day in the sun.

Hollis always smelled like his pockets were full of ripe chicken guts, and his overalls were stiff as metal. He didn't wear a beard; he wore a stubble. The stubble was coal black despite the fact he was over sixty, and it always seemed to be the same length, the length where you've got to shave or start telling everybody you're growing a beard. Hollis Toomey did neither...A mosquito couldn't fly through a door he was standing in he was so wide and high, and more, he was obviously indestructible. He ran on his own time, went where he needed to go."



If you think fiction writers have all the fun, think again. Your own life is populated with people who will make wonderful characters if you take the time and care to render them accurately.

You don't need to elaborate on every detail of character in the story. However, you do need to know enough that you can choose what to include and what to omit; and the reader needs to know enough for the character's actions to seem believable. 'But this really happened!' is a weak defence of a character's actions if the character is so vague that the reader doubts the veracity of the story."



Reading On Journaling

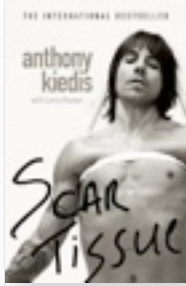
- http://www.rightmindlogic.com/why_and_how.htm
- <http://42explore.com/journal.htm>
- Writing the Journey: <http://www.writingthejourney.com/>
- <http://www.storyhelp.com> This site belongs to a very well known author, Tristine Rainer. Tristine has written some excellent books on journal and autobiography writing and throughout this course, you will find relevant quotes from her. Tristine's two best known books are 'The New Diary' and 'Your Life As Story: Writing The New Autobiography.'

Her books do not normally appear in Australian shops, however, if you are interested, you may be able to find them through your library, or order them through a major chain such Dymocks or Angus and Robertson. You could also try Amazon, the online bookshop at <http://www.amazon.com>

Decisions To Be Made

Write a list of all the areas you want to write about, then talk to other members of the family to see what interest they have, and what help they can give. You will need to build co-operation to be

successful in a project like this. The input of others will also help you make these important decisions.



1. **Information Availability:** What information can you get hold of? What resources do you have? Who in the family wants to talk, and who just doesn't want the past brought up?

2. **Size:** How big do you want your story or your family history to be? What is manageable? Be realistic. It avoids disappointment later when you have to cut your project down to size. Do you want it in a format that can be added to later?

3. **Format:** Are you going to write the family history in a book form? Are you going to do it as a video of interviews of relatives reminiscing over coffee? Are you going to get people to record their memories on cassette tape? Are you going to interview relatives and friends of the family? How far away are they? Is it practical? If you write a book, will it go to a small publisher or be done on someone's home computer? What will the costs be?

4. **Title:** Think about a catchy title. Dame Mary Durack wrote "Kings In Grass Castles" from the diaries within her family. It is an excellent example of an attention grabbing title! The diaries gave an insight into the times they lived in, and the personality of the people involved. A mini series has now been made from Dame Mary Durack's books. Have a think about what you could call your family history, and have some fun with it.

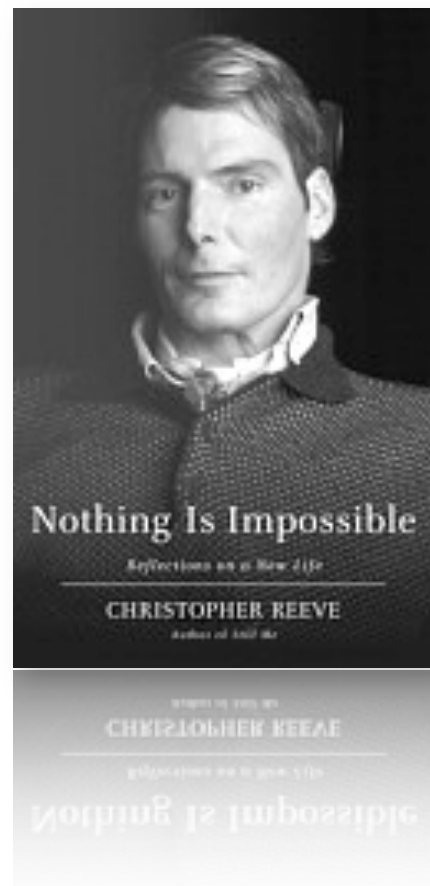
5. **Project Duration:** The final major decision is setting a deadline. You are more likely to achieve what you want, if you do set one. If you don't, it may become a never ending project that is abandoned along the way.

Choosing A Meaningful Title

Browsing in the bookshops I am often inspired by the titles of various biographies and autobiographies they have. Some of them were downright dreary such as "Lucy: My Life," or "The Biography of" The ones below though, added interest and got me interested in the books. The most intriguing being "Wild Horses Don't Swim." I wanted to find out what that meant. A good title provides a hook to get you to read it.

It's a fun exercise to choose a title for your autobiography. Consider some of these and see what you can come up with for your own life story.

- Invincible Warrior
- Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood
- Dangerous Muse
- Bright Lights: Dark Shadows (Abba)
- Me: Mine
- Common Ground (Malcolm Fraser)
- Freedom In Exile (Dalai Lama)
- Recollections From A Bleeding Heart
- Larrikin and Saint
- Belonging: A Memoir
- To Hell and Back (Meatloaf)
- A Single Step
- Beneath The Underdog
- Fighting Spirit (Bruce Lee)
- Kiss and Make-Up (Gene Simmons)
- The White Mouse
- Moments Of Being
- All Of Me
- Romance and Reality (Mary Shelley)
- Nothing Is Impossible (Christopher Reeve)
- Crazy From The Heat
- The Chosen One (David Owen)
- Meet Me At The Top
- Speaking For Myself
- Wild Horses Don't Swim
- A Portrait In Sepia (This was a novel, but the title caught my eye.)



You may also enjoy this article on choosing a book title: <http://searchwarp.com/swa79286.htm>

"A Writer? Who, me? "

It is very common to be nervous about writing, or to feel that you don't have what it takes. Don't let that stop you! If you find satisfaction in writing, then write and enjoy it. Ignore your demanding 'internal censor' who will tell you that you're not good enough, or that your life is far too boring. Do I hear you say, "easier said than done?" Here are some helpful quotes from Julia Cameron's book "The Right To Write" which talks about this same issue.

"We want to write with a net under ourselves, a net that says we are not foolish spending our time doing something that might not pay off... There is something very right about simply letting yourself write. And the way to do that is to begin, to begin where you are... "Don't try to write something perfect, just write. Don't try to write the whole megillah; just start the whole magillah."

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quote
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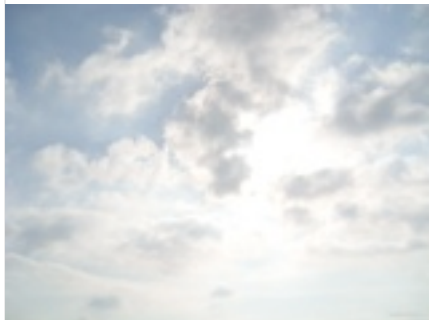
We can have an image in our minds of what a writer should be like that we're sure we just don't measure up to. That image can be our greatest barrier to writing. I've seen many interviews with writers from all walks of life and genres, and every one writes very differently. The two things they have in common are they all struggle with the creative muse at times, and they are all down to earth, every day people. There is no magical aura that surrounds them. No granting of a unique creativity which is unattainable by us mere, mortal beings. The only difference between a writer and a would-be writer is that one has the courage to put pen to paper and get started, no matter how they feel! That person could just as easily be you, or me.



Discovery Exercise

I usually avoid using Wikipedia as it is an unreliable information source, however, this page is good. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_writing Please visit it now to learn about Freewriting to complete this exercise. Freewriting originated with author Julia Cameron. Her site is <http://www.theartistsway.com/>

Use this exercise to connect with your younger self. You are going to give this younger self the chance to speak through you in a personal letter. Set your hand on the page, and let your younger self speak to you of hopes, wishes, thoughts, concerns, and dreams. Do not censor anything your youngster has to tell you. Talk about it from your own perspective. It means that your



emphasis might be quite different from that of your official family version. For example, the family line might go 'Then we moved to this wonderful house in the country...' When you write you may discover you hated that move or that house. Write for at least half an hour.

An example of the exercise: 'I am 18 years old, just married. I am living on the top floor of an apartment block in Sydney. I am excited, nervous, and afraid of what the future holds. Even though our first home is not the palace I envisioned, I love it that when my windows are open, you can smell freshly baked bread from the bakery half a block away...'



Reading On Being A Writer

Please read the article “What Is A Writer?” at <http://www.writing-world.com/basics/writer.shtml>

You can discover more about Tristine at: <http://www.soulfulliving.com/discoveringjoy.htm> and her web site: <http://www.storyhelp.com>

Find out more about Julia Cameron from her web site at: <http://www.theartistsway.com> I thoroughly recommend all her books for inspiration and direction.

You will also enjoy Natalie Goldberg: <http://www.nataliegoldberg.com/>

If you need a little help becoming productive, Organized Writer.com has an excellent free resource named the Sidetracked Writer's Planner. It is worth checking out! It is one of my favourite writer's resources.
<http://www.organizedwriter.com/>

Other People's Privacy

Another point worth emphasising is writing about other people in a public autobiography or family history. If you know it will cause family fights, grievances or that people will be hurt, it is best to avoid it. Family skeletons are often best left jangling in the family closet, unless you have written permission from that person who understands exactly what you intend to bring up. It may also be safe if the person in question is deceased, and the event so long ago, no one will be harmed. It is



still, however, wisdom to check the existing relatives to make sure you still won't do some damage, for example, their children or grandchildren that may be affected.

The best approach you can take is to talk about what you felt in that situation. Don't go into their side and private business.

There may also be legal problems with defamation etc. If in doubt, you may find it wise to get legal advice. Kindness is always the best measure of how to handle a delicate situation.

Other Original Ways Of Representing A Life

In the Internet era we tell our life stories in so many different ways: through Facebook status entries, tweets, blogs and personal web pages. All these can be added to your autobiography as a snapshot of what you were doing at the time; how you were feeling and what was happening in the world around you.

However, there are many more ways than words to communicate your life story, or that of your ancestors. If you are into family history, you may have come across story quilts. Here is an example.



These particular quilts are from a project named "Stitching the Stories 2000." The back of the card reads, "Two quilted wallhangings depicting women's experience of paid home based work. Highlighted is the impact of work related issues on these

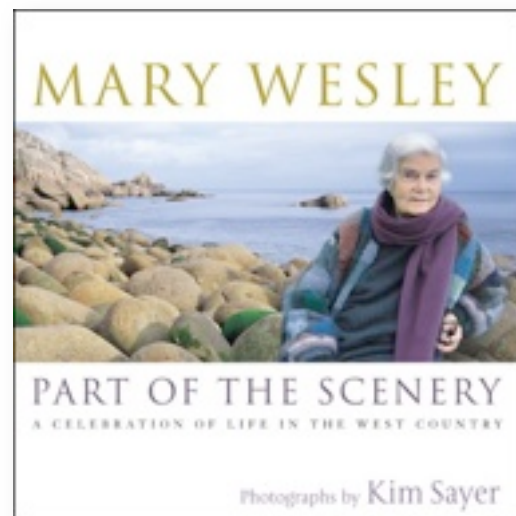
workers and their families. The hangings were made by women from mainly Vietnamese and Spanish speaking communities."

You may have family treasures such as these you can photograph and add to your family history. Any paintings, art or crafts of any kind can be placed in with your genealogical information to give that person life and a chance to "speak" in their own words.

More Photos, Less Words

Family stories and autobiographies don't have to be serious, wordy books. Fiction author Mary Wesley published a beautiful coffee table book which was autobiographical. Mary's novels are based around Cornwall where she grew up.

This book places together stunning two page colour photos of the scenery in the area, with very short pieces of writing about her life. If you don't want to write pages and pages, but just want to get the essence across, this is an inspirational idea. It produces an easy to read, personal treasure.

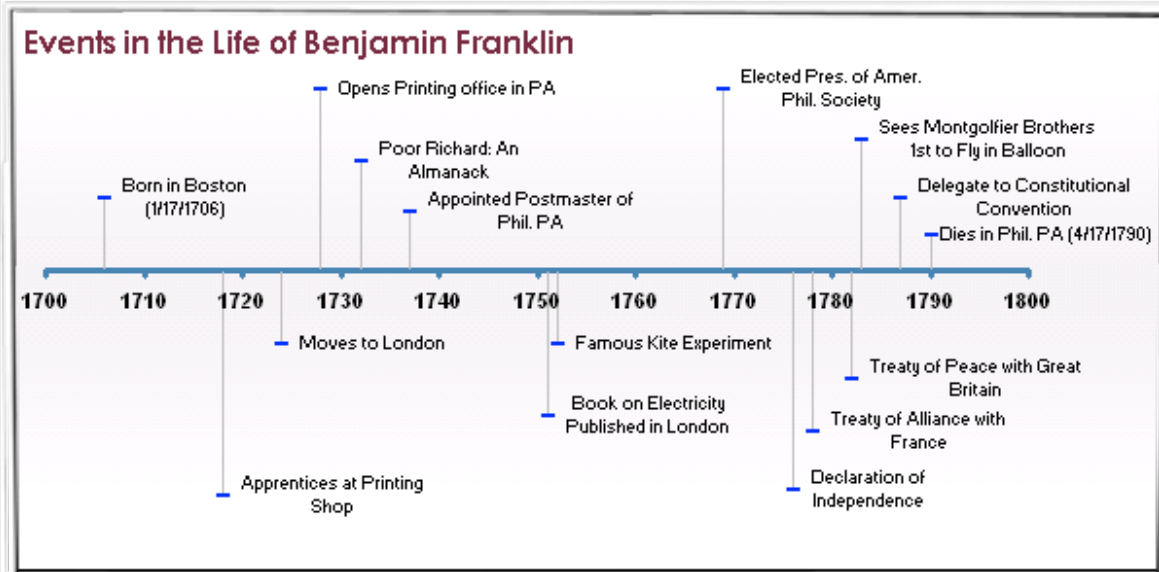


Brainstorm some ideas on alternative approaches you can take to your family history or autobiography to make it original, colourful and attractive to read. Think outside the ordinary and make it representational of who you are, or a theme that has run through your family, if there happens to be one. I'd love to hear your ideas.

Building A Structure

Now we're going to work on a more structured outline of your, or your ancestor's, life history, and develop it from there. The most

basic method of laying out a history on paper is a timeline. Starting from birth and going through until death, or the present time, timelines note down the main events which have occurred.



Don't forget to put in dates, and places! They are very important markers in tracking time. Remember also, that even though we are starting the timeline from birth, there is no rule that your finished family history or autobiography has to start at birth. Many stories of people's lives start from a significant, pivotal point in their life. It may be the diagnosis of a major illness, a birth, a death, a career or location change. It could be a major decision point, or a place in your life where everything was blossoming or coming apart at the seams.

There are as many starting points and approaches as there are lives to be written about. For one fresh approach, have a look at the memory profiles and letters to the future at

<http://www.valentinismountain.com/> You can join and contribute to this site for free and follow it on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Family-history-saving-your-memories-at-ValentinosMountaincom/186330158066689>

Draw A Timeline Exercise

If you haven't already done so, it's time for you to write a timeline of your or an ancestor's life events. You may wish to produce a more appealing timeline than a simple chart. Below are several great examples. To see the full image of the Woodlands Timeline on the next page, go to http://www.woodlandpattern.org/gallery/25th_timeline.shtml



I'd recommend you go to Google, type timeline into the search box then click images. The range of different options that will come up will give you all kinds of ideas on different approaches you can take.

This one refers to many different people but the artistic approach makes it appealing and readable. You can find it at <http://www.1-900-870-6235.com/eLearning/GreatIdeas/TimeLineMap.htm#>



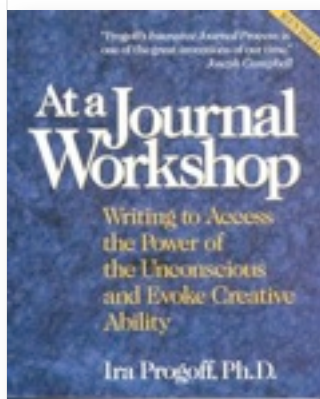
To draw up your timeline, you will need several large sheets of plain paper, a wide whiteboard or an unlimited sized file on your computer, such as a Microsoft Excel or Apple Numbers spreadsheet. Whatever you use needs to allow you to go sideways. You could also use any basic word processing document turned on its side (landscape). To do that, open a new document and go to Page Properties. That should allow you to do it.

It may take you several drafts to get your timeline right, and some time to get all the information in.

Stepping Stones Periods

Once you have completed your time line, I would like you to try Ira Progoff's approach to fill out your life history further. You can also use his prompts to capture the essence of what was happening in the life of anyone you are writing about in your family history.

In his book, "At A Journal Workshop" Ira describes the stepping stones period as: "Stepping stones are essentially markings that enable us to retrace the pathways of our experience..." A stepping stone is "... a unit of life/time, a period in our life in which many varied experiences are contained. The period as a whole is symbolised to us subjectively by the particular stepping stone event which represents the primary and governing quality of that time in our life... Each period is governed by a particular life theme, or by a set of themes..."



Now for your time line periods, think about what each one meant and write down for each section one sentence starting with "It is

a time when..." This will give you a more solid starting point to work from.

Here are some examples from Ira's book to help you.

- "It is a time when I am learning how to live in America after immigrating here."
- "It is a time when I am getting used to being retired."
- "It is a time when nothing seems to be happening at all and my life is at a standstill."



Resources on Ira Progoff can be found at:

- <http://www.intensivejournal.org/>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ira_Progoff

Using Technology To Capture Places

One thing I noticed after moving away from an area where I had lived for over twenty-six years, I had never taken photos of the familiar places that make up my home town and many memories. Places like my High School, even what it was like looking down my street. Satellite technology and services such as Google Earth can now help you make up for those lost opportunities. You can get photos of places from aerial or street views for free. This can also be helpful if you want to see what places overseas look like when you are working on family history projects. Even if the places have changed dramatically over decades, you can still see the layout of streets and neighbourhoods which can help you place clues together.



Check out Google Maps and Google Earth and go on a new voyage of discovery.

Do I Take A Chronological Or Thematic Approach?

Even though we map out life events chronologically, you don't have to be stuck writing that way. You can write by the themes that you can see are weaved through experiences. Below is a description of both approaches with points worth considering. They are written with autobiography writing in mind, but are very easily adaptable to biographical family history writing.

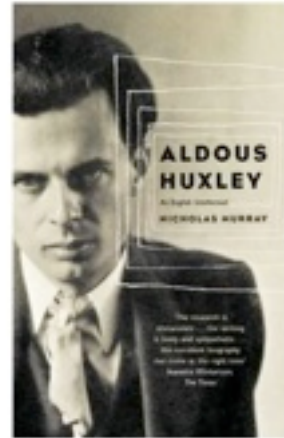
Chronological Approach

- Can be too long. Try picking out the highlights.
- There is the danger of reducing your life to a series of dates and events without telling how you felt about them.
- You can do one period of your life and write it up, then another period and so on, and then they can all be put together logically, making writing a book manageable.
- Start any autobiography by writing a time line of your life. Split it into 5 or 10 year periods.
- Is there any cultural or geographic series of events which ran over the same period which had an impact on you which you can also weave in? For example, the development of technology, or changes in the teaching system. Perhaps changes in fashion or music. Only use this if you were significantly involved in, or impacted by those changes over time.
- Talk about your changes in expectations of life during those periods, and whether your initial expectations of how things would be were met. Did you dramatically change your philosophy at any stage? Why?



Thematic Approach

- Identify the major turning points in your life, or major crisis' and/or events that shaped you.
- Ask yourself what internal conflicts you have had in your life. How were they resolved?
- Were there problems or challenges along a certain similar line that you kept facing? For example, relationship breakdowns, recurrent fears of failure. How did you overcome them? Write down the process, the journey.
- Good for an inspirational story.
- What cause have you fought for most in your life. Your freedom? Religion? Have you pursued fame or fortune? Are relationships your top priority? Was body image a major concern? Did you suffer a major physical or mental illness? Did you feel tormented or haunted by anything or anyone?



Discovery Exercise

Look at your “It was a time when...” sentences and your time line, and try and identify the themes that have been woven into your life or family member's life. A theme will be something that has repeated more than once, and which has great significance. Examples include love, work, fighting for your independence, health, survival, finding out who you are, change, spirituality, challenges of parenthood etc.

When you have done that, write down in point form which events have occurred that influenced this theme. Later you can go back and write about these themes at length in your journal.



Reading On Life Stories

Do you like reading other people's life stories? Try these sites:

- Biography.com: <http://www.biography.com>
- Genealogy Today: <http://www.genealogytoday.com>
- Biography Centre: <http://www.biography-center.com/>

Recapturing The Past: Memory Joggers

"History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illumines reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity."

Marcus Tullius Cicer

In her book "Your Life As Story: Writing The New Autobiography," Tristine Rainer has some excellent suggestions. I couldn't put it any better myself, so I have shortened and listed some of her recommendations.

Photos

Photos can help you reenter the feelings of the person you once were, and also help you remember others at the period of time you are trying to capture. Ask yourself:

- Why was I wearing that dress/that suit?
- What were my feelings toward the other people in the photo?
- What was I thinking that I looked so sad/so happy/so surprised?
- What does the composition of the photo reveal?
- What does the photo hide?



Music

Pete Hamill admits that in writing his memoir, *A Drinking Life*, he could remember more about being eleven than being thirty-two, because at that age he wasn't yet drinking. So he used a memory trick you may find useful. He bought a book that listed the top hit songs of 1943, and then he bought of those songs. He says that listening to Cole Porter's worst song brought back memories of where he was the year the song was popular, who he was with, and what he was doing, even memories of streets he had been in, while listening to "Don't Fence Me In."

<http://www.petehamill.com/drinkingchap1.html> If you aren't writing about yourself, you may like to buy music that was popular in the era you are writing about. It is a great way to capture the themes and energy of the period.

Objects

Objects seem to hold the energy of the past. As anyone who has lost mementos to fire, earthquake, or hurricane knows, certain objects are irreplaceable because of the memories they contain. Having found that meditating on certain photos led her into reverie, one author, S Golant, also tried meditating on chosen objects. In contemplating "soap," recalled how her mother had hoarded bars and boxes of soap when she was growing up, and she realized that she too, hoarded it. She had no idea when she began writing about a bar of soap, that it would lead her to remember issues of entitlement and disentanglement.





Floor Plans

Because the memory is embedded through our primary senses of sound and movement, we can recall the floor plan of the homes we have lived in, even when no other memory remains. Gaston Bachelard writes: “the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaston_Bachelard

Research The Era

Just as you induce reminiscence by looking at photos or listening to music of a particular period, so you can aid memory by looking in guide books for geographic reminders, and in almanacs, periodicals, or films of the period for details about the times. Include that research in your autobiography or family history, to give a broader, more interesting perspective of the time.



The Body's Memory

Another way to remember is through repeating body movements. For example, if you worked in an ice cream parlor, stand up from your desk and mime what you used to do to make an ice cream. Pick up a cone, bend over and stretch your arm down to scoop the hard ice cream at the bottom of the container, and feel the refrigerator frost your nose and cheeks.

Ken Moon, author of “Write Your Life: A Guide To Autobiography” also suggests:

- Old formal records / documents
- Old furniture (how did that handle get broken?)
- Old boxes and packets
- China cabinet contents and the history of pieces
- Pieces of jewelry and their history
- Photos
- Old letters and diaries

Mind Mapping

A valuable technique is mind mapping, also known as clustering. Simply explained, you write down your topic in the middle of a blank page, draw a circle around it, and then you write down whatever words come to mind that relate to that topic. These are

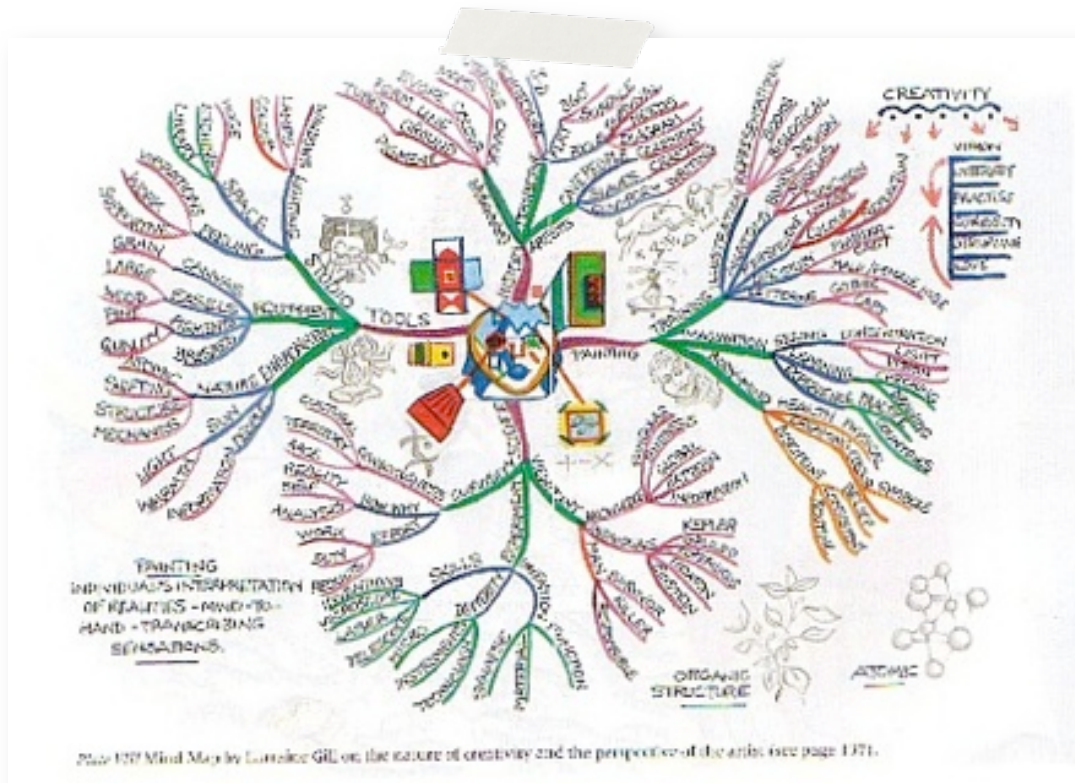


placed in other circles which are linked to the main topic by a line. From there, you can radiate out from the topic circle, by writing down what you associate with these words, until you cannot come up with any more. You can have as many circles going in as many directions as you like. The idea is to work fast, just letting the ideas come to you without evaluating them. You will be surprised at what comes out!

Mind maps can also use lines and shapes other than circles. To enhance your creativity and make them more easy to follow,

using colours and pictures is also helpful. Here are a few examples of mind maps which use these techniques, from Barry and Tony Buzan's Mind Mapping book. You can also visit the examples on his web site at: <http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk/mind-maps-examples.htm>

To read more about Mind Maps, please visit the following site: <http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk/questions-answers.htm>



The more attractive your map is, the more benefit you are likely to gain from it, but remember, it doesn't have to be perfect. As long as you can follow it and gain inspiration from it, that's all that counts.



Writing Using Your Senses

When you write, it is beneficial to use the five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste and smell) to fully describe where the person is and what is happening. This makes the story much more tangible for the reader. This exercise also included a sense of time, space and the unknown, which are equally as important. Below is an example of a technique I learnt in a fiction writing workshop for writing using the five senses. If you are writing about someone else, you can use your experience of being in similar places or weather situations to write about what they make have experienced and add a new dimension to what you are saying.

An Example:

Sight: Making her way along the wall, her long blonde hair was thrown around randomly by the wind. Sheltered only by her tight black jeans and loose pink T-shirt, she mechanically moved forward.

Sound: Snapping the peace of the sea wall, a car door slammed in the adjacent carpark, startling her, as tendrils of guilt and self doubt snaked around her soul.

Smell: She walked and walked, barely seeing where she was going as wave after wave relentlessly pounded against the rocks, the wind carrying the ocean's salty smell and the stench of rotting seaweed.

Taste: A renegade wave crashed over the breakwall drenching her, but she only licked the salty water off her lips and kept walking, uncaring, unseeing.

Touch: Her bare arms were getting cold, goose pimples rose and were grazed by the harsh wind.

Time: Memories of past tribulations mingled with her distress, echoing through her mind. (The place in the overall story where this scene takes place.)

Space: The gloom of the day seemed magnified by the vast terrain of grey, angry waves that stretched either side of her. (Describe the surroundings. There is a difference between a claustrophobic lift packed with people, and an open field.)

Unknown: In the beginning had there been a hint of promise that perhaps he would respond? (In other words, what will happen next? Where is the character's thoughts in relation to what happens next?)



The Final Product:

'Snapping the peace of the sea wall, a car door slammed in the adjacent carpark. It startled her, as tendrils of guilt and self doubt snaked around her soul. Memories of past tribulations mingled with her distress, echoing through her mind. In the beginning, had there been a hint of promise that perhaps he would respond? Maybe they could pick up the pieces of their lives, and make the marriage work? The gloom of the day seemed magnified by the vast terrain of grey, angry waves that stretched either side of her. She walked and walked, barely seeing where she was going as wave after wave pounded relentlessly against the rocks, the wind carrying the ocean's salty smell, and the stench of rotting seaweed. Just another unnamed walker who's pain didn't matter to the world. Making her way along the wall, her long blonde hair was thrown around randomly by the wind. Sheltered only by her tight black jeans and loose pink T-shirt, she mechanically moved forward. Her bare arms were getting cold. Goose pimples rose and were grazed by the harsh wind. A renegade wave crashed over the break wall, drenching her, but she only licked the salty water off her lips and kept walking, uncaring, unseeing, unfeeling.'

Five senses idea from Fiction 98 Creative Writing Course at the Writers Village.com.
The example is my own imperfect work for this exercise.

Activating The Senses Exercise

1. Put several tactile objects into a bag. Select an object randomly, then run your hands over the object with your eyes closed. Feel its shape, texture and surfaces. Write down a description of that object using all the five senses.
2. Now describe a tactile experience in part of your body. For example, the way mud feels when it squelches between your toes.

3. Choose a fragrance or odor you are familiar with in your home. How would you describe it to an alien? What memories does this smell invoke?



Reading On Writing Prompts

You may find some of these prompts useful tools to start you writing. The tools on some of these sites are changed regularly, so if you like them, bookmark them and visit again.

- <http://www.writingthejourney.com>
- <http://www.canteach.ca/elementary/prompts.html>
- <http://journalsparks.com/>
- <http://journalingprompts.com>

Handling The Hard Parts

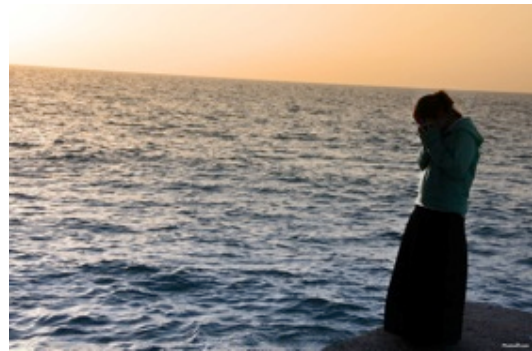
“There is no man, however wise, who has not at some period of his youth said things, or lived in a way the consciousness of which is so unpleasant to him in later life that he would gladly, if he could, expunge it from his memory.”

Marcel Proust

Everyone of us has been through good times and bad, some of which are bleaker and more traumatic than others. Going back and exploring your life, or even the process of discovering what has happened in our loved ones and ancestor's lives, can bring to

the surface all kinds of repressed memories and unfinished business. For some of us, it can bring back unbearable trauma.

The decision to write about your life does not mean you are obliged to confront every event or issue. It is not always wise to go back to events too painful to handle, particularly if you are feeling alone.



If you do intend to write as therapy, you need to have support to assist you in dealing with the issues that come out. That may include working with a mental health professional. My request is that you don't delve into memories which will traumatise you, as it is not necessary. Also when writing any of your autobiography, if you experience painful memories that lead to you having nightmares, flashbacks or any other trauma, please immediately stop the course and get support. It has happened to several of my students and causes me a great deal of concern. I want this course to be a positive experience, not a painful one.

Dealing With Your Dark Side

Here are some words of wisdom from Tristine Rainer, in *Your Life As Story: Writing The New Autobiography*. "There is not always a benefit in revisiting trauma. Remembering a painful incident, even one that has been repressed, will not in itself guarantee release. To think it will is a popular misconception and a



misinterpretation of Freud, who himself recognised that it was by helping the patient make a meaningful story out of buried memories that his cure was effected.

In fact, by intentionally recalling a traumatic or painful experience, you may simply re-injure

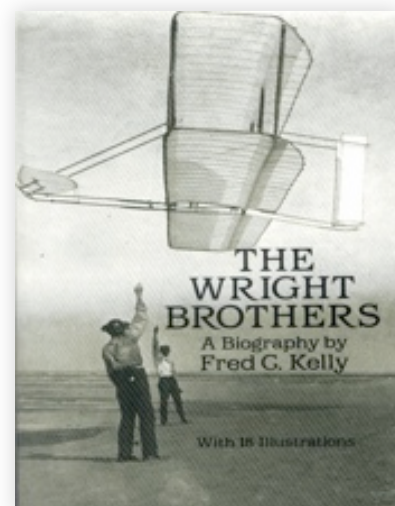
yourself - unless it is as part of a larger healing story. It is by making meaning out of memory that one is healed, whether through therapy, life, journal writing, or autobiographical writing. That meaning need not be religious, spiritual, or psychological. It can be philosophic or aesthetic, the ability to make something beautiful crafted out of what in life was arbitrary, ugly or painful.

Autobiographical narrative is more than simply remembering on paper. It is a second chance, a chance to get it right. Not that you change events, not that you don't write about helplessly watching your sister drown with all the pain and guilt you experienced, but that this time you are on your own side, even in pain and failure. Now you can tell the story with insight and find the meaning of the single experience within the context of your whole life.

Remembering one's suffering from the perspective of acquired wisdom is different from simply replaying it... Yes even though the process is ultimately healing, it can still hurt mercilessly..."

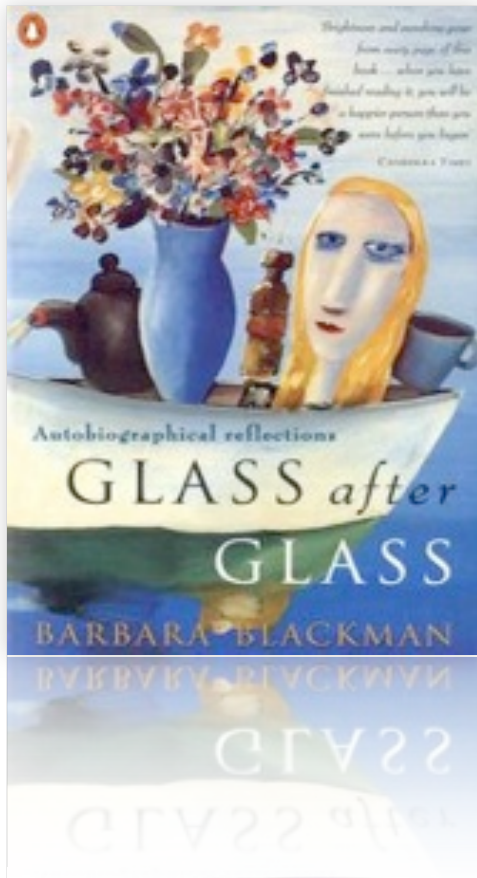
Other authors, in a variety of books, have made the following observations.

- It can be therapy to find meaning, or it can be intense grief, avoid grief.
- An autobiography is not a set essay: you select the material. There is a considerable difference between introspective and intimate.
- Some writers use understatement and detachment: honest evasions.
- If there is another person involved in the story, talk about what you felt in that situation: don't go into their side and private business. There may also be legal problems with defamation etc.
- Be sensitive to family secrets and hurting people.



An Example

Barbara Blackman, in her autobiography "Glass After Glass" wrote very selectively to maintain her privacy. Barbara went



through a messy, public divorce from her artist husband, Charles Blackman, and then a subsequent nervous breakdown. However, when you read her book, neither are referred to clearly. That is her right, it was an excellent example of an “honest evasion.”

You too are not obliged to publicly share issues which are too personal, or best left alone. You are free to write about them in your journal, but you retain the power to choose where you draw the line in sharing.

Journaling As A Healing Tool

On less traumatic issues, minor hurts, everyday conflicts, decisions or crisis, journaling is an effective tool that is good for both your physical and mental health. Consider this article from the Centre For The Advancement Of Health Online.

Writing Your Feelings: Good Medicine for Chronic Conditions

The simple act of writing down thoughts and feelings about particularly stressful events can help persons with chronic conditions improve their health, according to new research.

Asthma and arthritis patients who for several days wrote down their feelings about a stressful event in their lives showed significant improvement in their conditions during a four month study, but a comparison group of patients who wrote instead about their plans for the day improved only half as much, a team

of scientists report in the April 15 Journal of the American Medical Association.

"Although it may be difficult to believe that a brief writing task can meaningfully impact health, this study replicates in a chronically ill sample what a burgeoning literature indicates in healthy individuals," say Joshua M. Smyth, PhD, and Arthur A. Stone, PhD, and their colleagues.

Previous studies showed that healthy individuals who perform similar writing tasks report fewer medical symptoms, greater well being, and less use of health care services, but until now, the impact of writing down thoughts and emotions had not been explored in people with chronic health conditions, such as asthma and rheumatoid arthritis, say Smyth, of the North Dakota State University Department of Psychology, and Stone, of the Department of Psychiatry, State University of New York at Stony Brook.



The investigators had 48 asthma patients and 35 arthritis patients write about the most stressful experience in their lives for 20 minutes on three consecutive days. A comparison group of 22 asthma patients and 21 arthritis patients wrote instead about their plans for the day. All the patients continued with their regular medical care and their condition was evaluated after two weeks, two months, and four months.

The investigators found that nearly half (47 percent) of the patients who wrote about their feelings showed clinical improvement after four months compared with 24 percent of those in the control group.

The asthma patients who wrote about stressful events had a 19 percent increase in lung function, on average, whereas those in the comparison group showed no change. Arthritis patients who wrote about stressful events showed a 28 percent average reduction in the severity of their disease, while those in the comparison group showed no change.



The investigators say it remains unclear why writing about one's feelings is effective medicine. In previous research, healthy persons who completed the task found it emotionally upsetting, but also showed positive changes in various physiological health measures, including heart rate, blood pressure, and immune function.

"It is possible that such affective or physiological responses can explain our results," the investigators say.



Alternatively, it is possible that the writing task changed the way people thought and remembered previous stressful events in their lives, and helped them cope with new stressful events.

The researchers note that it is not yet known whether the writing task remains effective beyond the four-month period studied and whether it can produce similar results in patients with other chronic conditions. They also caution that writing certainly should not replace qualified treatment.

Center for the Advancement of Health
pchong@cfah.org

Note: This article is no longer listed on the site, so it has been fully reproduced here.



Reading On Improving Health Through Journaling

<http://www.shpm.com/articles/health/journal.html>

The Bright Light Of Meaning



As I said in week one, I want this course to be positive. We can't realistically ignore every painful event that has happened, however I would like to place the emphasis on looking for a positive side in your writing. When you describe an incident which hurt you, I would like you to also write down a positive

aspect to it. It may be a lesson you learnt, or an inner strength you gained. I know it is a cliché that every dark cloud has a silver lining, and they can be hard to find, but it is worth trying to find one.

Gratitude Journals

Another idea you may like to adopt is a gratitude journal. The idea of the journal is to write down every day five things that you are grateful for. Even if your day was horrific, you may still feel grateful for your family, a warm bed, a decent meal or even that you have tomorrow as a new start. People have found gratitude journals have changed their outlook on life, and given their day a new lightness and meaning.





Additional Reading On Gratitude Journals

- http://simpleabundance.com/gratitude_journal.html
- <http://www.simpleabundance.com/gratitude.html>
- <http://www.seedsofknowledge.com/journals4.html>

A Balanced, Simple Approach: William Yang

I had the joy of taking one of my classes to our regional Art Gallery to see an exhibit by photographer William Yang. At the time I had several students in my class who didn't want to get into the 'touchy feely' side of autobiography. They just wanted to put down the facts. William managed to do that and express his feelings about how events and people had affected him. What amazed me the most was that he did it in a way that didn't include any form of judgement, or overdone sentiment. He did release some skeletons from the family closet, but they were all his skeletons, from his point of view only. He waited until his mother, father and other close relatives were deceased before he



he did so. Several members of the class were very touched and inspired by the challenge to put in simple, selective emotional comment that wasn't too over the top.

The Gallery and Collection are mentioned here: http://qag.qld.gov.au/collection/contemporary_australian_art/william_yang



Reading On Dream Interpretation



If you would like to learn about dreams and how you can use them in writing your journal, please visit this link from Rider University. We will not be addressing the use of dreams in journal writing in this course. This link is comprehensive, and there are further resources on the internet you can search for which will answer your questions, and inspire you further.

<http://www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/dreams.html>



Additional Writing Prompts On Spirituality

These came from Wordweave, which is now offline. This is not a submittable assignment. You are welcome to use these questions for your own use, whenever you have the time.

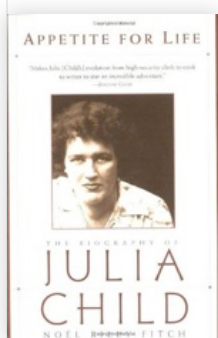
- Joy and gratitude: how do I celebrate and give thanks for the gift of life?
- Longing: what would satisfy me? What do I desire?
- Creativity: what are my gifts? What is my vocation? What can I create?

- Loneliness: am I loved? Can I love? How close should I be to other people?
- Compassion: who are my people? Who is included and excluded from the community?
- Boredom: what is my passion? What will renew me?
- Despair: is there any meaning to my life?
- Disillusionment: can I know the truth?
- Compulsion and addiction: am I free? Can I change?
- Resentment: how do I punish or forgive those who have wronged me?
- Personal guilt: what is taboo? What ought I to do? How do I make amends?
- Ecological guilt: how can we heal and tend the earth and animal spirits?
- Dis-ease and alienation: what is wrong? Can I be healed? How?
- Fear of death: for what may I hope? Can I survive death?
- Horror: why is there evil?
- Wonder and awe: why is there something rather than nothing?



Finishing Touches

The best stories are the ones that vividly describe not only the events that took place, but also details about people, where it happened and when it happened. Describing rooms, smells, tastes, clothes, mannerisms, fashions and details of appearance,



are all techniques which make your writing richer and more interesting. The same techniques that are used to write fiction, can be used very effectively to add to the charm and quality of an life story or family history. They are a great asset. We'll be briefly exploring some of these techniques.

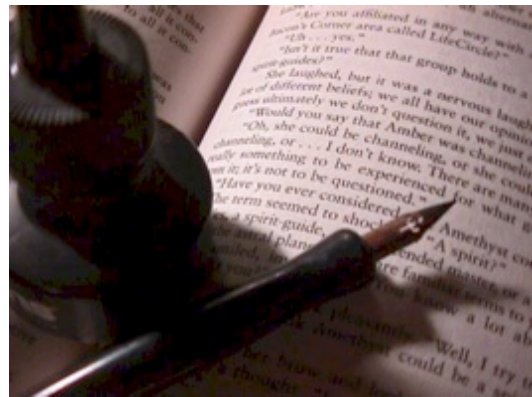
If you don't think you've got the skills it takes to be

a fiction writer, or if you only want to journal, don't let it put you off. These writing techniques are also fun to play with, and can be introduced simply to your writing. Experiment with the ideas. Use them in your journal, and don't worry if they don't come out too brilliantly. Initially, you are still writing for your eyes only, and practice makes perfect. You may find it helpful to do a short story writing course, or read a book on fiction writing. Even if you can't write to your expectations, use this section to inspire you, and help you to remember to include important details in your writing, such as physical appearance, character traits, fashions, culture and your surroundings etc.

In this last week I would also like to give you some final suggestions for organising your work.

Most importantly, I would like you to look into joining a group which communicates by email or notice boards, or do a writing course to continue learning, and to keep your enthusiasm fresh. Other

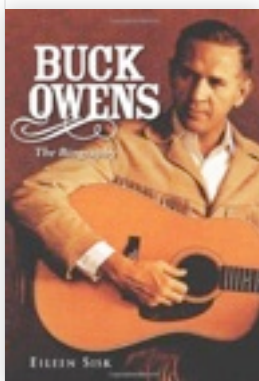
writers are an invaluable resource of ideas and constructive criticism, not to mention friendship. It is worth getting involved.



Techniques To Add Colour To Your Story

Names

In fiction, the choosing of a character's name is of prime

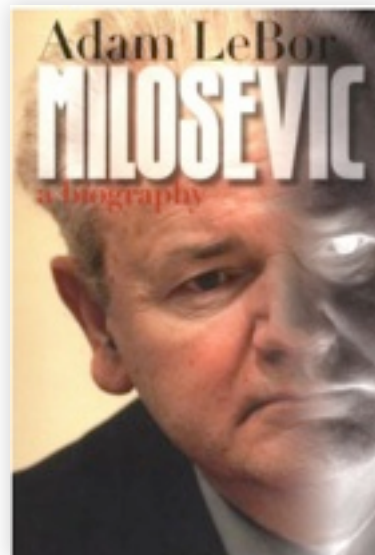


importance. In real life, it is chosen for us and we have to put up with it, even though we may not like it. Though sometimes we may be known by a nickname relevant to the type of person you are, who people see you as being. There are also different fashions of names, with certain ones being extremely popular during a particular period. Or perhaps you were named after someone. Your parents may have hoped that by

giving you that name, you would walk in that person's footsteps, or that it may somehow positively influence your character.

Physical Appearance

This gives definite clues to someone's personality. For instance, looking back, did your grandfather seem to be always smiling while your grandmother's brow was permanently furrowed, and her mouth drawn into a tight forbidding line as if she had all the cares of the world on her shoulders? Did your uncle have a bump on the bridge of his nose and 'cauliflower' ears? Or perhaps you came from a military family with the result that everyone automatically developed a ramrod stance? Describing physical appearance enables the reader to see your characters more clearly, while the way in which you describe them demonstrates your skill as a writer.



Clothing

The clothes we wear make an obvious statement about us even though, to some extent, they will be dictated by the fashion and



mores of the time. Are they clinging to a more conservative, out-dated fashion to protect their reputation? The person who dresses in gaudy colours is surely begging to be noticed? If garments are meticulously pressed, and ties always worn, even on informal occasions, we can safely deduce that those people are fastidious in all aspects of their personal life, not just their appearance. 'My childhood memories of my father are of his being dressed in old corduroy trousers tied around the ankle with a length of string. Invariably in wet or cold weather he would have on a shabby, discoloured gabardine raincoat, passed on by some well-to-do

gentleman, and fastened around the waist with twine... He had one decent suit for Sundays, weddings and funerals, and fashion didn't come into the equation. That one suit would have lasted all of twenty years. Brown with a thin, pale stripe, I'm sure it must have been shiny with all that wear and outdated in style.'

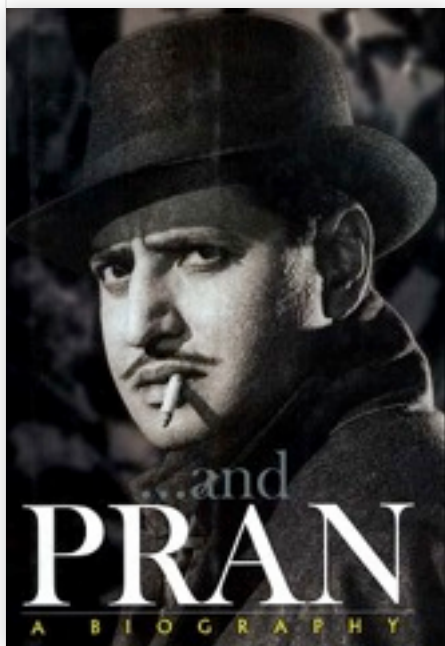


Mannerisms / Body Language

Was your mother forever plumping up cushions and flicking a duster around the room? Or did she kick off her shoes wherever she happened to be, push aside any toys, books or other paraphernalia cluttering up a chair and flop herself down, ready for a sociable chin-wag? Two totally different personalities would be shown by such actions. Did your great aunt, perhaps, seat herself primly, hands folded on her lap? Again, small 'brush strokes' add to your descriptions.

Character Traits

Remember not to tell us the sort of person someone was, but



show their character in action, either directly by means of a scene, or indirectly as illustrated below. Just saying your grandfather was a generous man doesn't bring him to life for your reader. 'My grandfather's generosity of spirit was a sore trial to my grandmother throughout her life. It was she, who had to find from somewhere, another coat to replace the one he'd given, without a second thought, to the old tramp he'd discovered sleeping under the hedge, shivering with cold.'

Adapted from Tristine Rainer's discussion of these details from her book, "Your Life As Story: Writing The New Autobiography."



Discovery Exercise

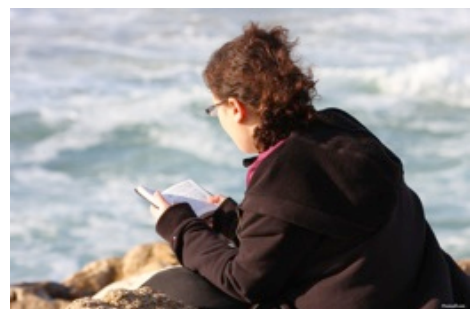
Choose two people from your life: one you have or had an affection for and one for whom you felt the complete opposite. Explain the impact that each person has had on you.



Keeping It Real

One of the greatest mistakes I see writers make is trying to make their work sound like literary prose, or one of their favourite authors. Writing always sounds better and more genuine if you write the way you speak and you sound like yourself. These are suggestions on writing style which will be of benefit to you.

- Say things in a positive way
- Forget ornate, flowery language
- Show, don't tell: use descriptions
- Don't state the obvious
- Avoid cliches
- Use strong verbs
- Be specific
- Vary the length and construction of your sentences, but make sure they are complete
- Don't describe the information in quotes, or repeat the parts which lead into the quote
- Trim quotes
- Keep descriptions a reasonable length
- Read it aloud and trust your ear
- Keep it short and simple



Practical Suggestions For Organising Your Work

Firstly here are some excellent suggestions from "Write Your Life: A Guide To Autobiography," by Ken Moon. They are for people who are working towards a formally published autobiographical or family history work.

- Workspace and shelving where you can leave things undisturbed.
- Be well stocked on stationary so you don't have to search for materials.
- Use a manilla folder filing system, or folders on your computer, for themes or life periods, years, events, however you decide to divide it up to be manageable.
- Use a computer, typewriter or handwritten manuscript, whatever you are comfortable with.
- Recycle abandoned wastepaper for use in drafts: it keeps the costs down and saves wastage.
- It's a good idea to keep rejected or reworked pages for a long time so you can go back to them. Put them in a box specifically for that purpose When finished, use as scrap paper.
- Keep two backups of work on two computer discs.



"How To Write Your Autobiography: Preserving Your Family Heritage"

by Patricia Anne Case

- Number each page before you start writing on it. That way you won't forget and later get the pages mixed up.
- Put in dates, places. If you don't write them down, readers won't know where or when they took place. This is particularly important if you are doing a family history.

- If telling a former way of doing things, e.g. grandma making butter, write down the steps that were taken to do it.
- If you write like you talk, you'll automatically take care of sentences and punctuation.



Discovery Exercise

Read through the above suggestions again, and write down which ones you can use, and your ideas on how you can start to implement the ones you need the most.



Reading On Publishing

I would like to leave you with links to several web sites on publishing. If you are interested, you can investigate yourself. I am not able to give out any information or recommendations in regards to publishing.

- Author Link <http://www.authorlink.com>
- Writing World (Formerly Inkspot.com) <http://www.writing-world.com>
- National Writer's Union (A United States site, but invaluable.) <http://www.nwu.org>
- You can publish your own work by uploading it to Lulu and only paying for the printing of as many copies as you need at the time. <http://www.lulu.com/> There are other similar services.



Conclusion

I hope this course has inspired and equipped you to continue on your writing journey. Again, I would like to encourage you to join a local writing and/or family history group, or an online community to keep the momentum going and continue to learn. The support and encouragement of others will help you to continue.

Wishing you all the best with your writing.

Cate Russell-Cole



References

Your Life As Story: Writing The New Autobiography by Tristine Rainer, Copyright 1997, Tarcher Putnam, New York (Penguin Putnam.) Available to Australians through: http://www.amazon.ca/Your-Life-Story-Tristine-Rainer/dp/0874779227/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1199524389&sr=1-1

Write Your Life: A Guide To Autobiography by Ken Moon, Copyright 1994, Wrightbooks Pty. Ltd., Victoria, Australia; or you can get a copy through <http://www.amazon.ca/Write-Your-Life-Guide-Autobiography/dp/0947351965>

How To Write Your Autobiography: Preserving Your Family Heritage by Patricia Anne Case, Copyright 1992, Woodridge Press Publishing Company, California

Make Your Words Work: Proven Techniques For Effective Writing For Fiction And Non-Fiction by Gary Provost, Copyright 1990, Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, Ohio

The Right To Write by Julia Cameron, Copyright 1999, Tarcher Putnam, New York (Penguin Putnam / Pan Books)

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About The Author

Cate Russell-Cole is a fully qualified and experienced Workplace Trainer and Social Worker. She has been researching, writing and teaching her own courses since 1990. Her most successful course to date is "Write Your Life Story," which has thriving Google Plus, Twitter and Facebook presences, which Cate maintains to provide resources and inspiration to life story writers.

Course Writing, Research and Training Work:

In addition to working online, Cate also teaches locally through both the Government and private sectors.

Cate has taught with the Adult Community Education programs hosted by TAFE in both New South Wales and Queensland. She has also worked for private training companies, Brisbane City Council and a variety of community services as a trainer.

Her involvement with the Brisbane City Council library system has included being asked to present lectures on Diary Writing for "One Book, One Brisbane Week" 2002. Students from the various libraries have started and maintained their own writing groups after they completed "Write Your Life Story," in order to continue to write and achieve their publication goals. "Write Your Life Story" has been so popular, students returned to re-take the course and waiting lists were often needed.

Journalism:

Cate is an experienced freelance journalist and editor. She has been published in local, national and Internet based ezines, magazines and newspapers. Her current Christian and writing articles are available both free and for sale through FaithWriters.com.

Follow Cate Online:

Cate Russell-Cole: Artios Communications: <http://www.virtual-desk.com.au/artios.html>

CommuniCATE Writers Blog: <http://cateartios.wordpress.com>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/#!/cateartios>

Google Plus: <https://plus.google.com/112808915215573430690/>

Write Your Life Story Fan Page on Facebook:
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Write-Your-Life-Story/173393852705651>

Other Publications By Cate Russell-Cole

Unleashing Your Creative Spirit E-Course

Prayer Journal Workshop

Four Dimensional Characterisation: Creating and Resolving Conflict in Fiction

Four Dimensional Characterisation: Writing About Emotional Reactions

Maintaining Your Independence, A Course For Seniors

Marketing For Writers

Person To Person: A Layman's Course in Communication Skills

For information on these courses, please email cate@virtual-desk.com.au